

## Ostracism

By Rolf O. Hubbe

Nowadays we say a person is being ostracized when he is shunned by his acquaintances due to some disgrace. In ancient Athens, where the term *ostracism* was first used, it referred to a specific political process, wherein by a vote of the citizens a great public figure could be removed from the city for a period of ten years. This action received its name from the fact that the ballot was a potsherd, or *ostrakon* in Greek. Plutarch describes the process in his biography of the Athenian statesman Aristides:

The process was something like this. Each person took an *ostrakon*, and when he had inscribed on it the name of a citizen he wished to remove, he brought it to a single spot of the market place which was surrounded with a fence/ the magistrates first counted up the total number of *ostraka*. For if fewer than six thousand brought in their votes, the ostracism was void. Then they placed each of the names in a separate pile. The one who was inscribed by the greatest number of people they sent out for proclamation. He had to stay away for ten years, although he continued to obtain the income of his property.

Ostracism was practiced at Athens over a period of seventy years, beginning in 487 B.C. It was instituted when a dictatorship- the rule of a tyrant, if we use the Greek term- was replaced with a constitutional government. Its purpose was to safeguard the government against renewed tyranny, being motivated, according to Aristotle, by a suspicion of powerful men. The first two persons ostracized were indeed friends of the deposed tyrant, but the procedure was quickly turned into a device for eliminating one's political rivals. The last instance of ostracism occurred in 417 B.C., when two powerful men, Alcibiades and Nicias, joined forces to protect their respective positions by persuading their friends to scratch the name of Hyperbolus, a lesser politician, on their sherds. Because the people of Athens felt that the ostracism of Hyperbolus corrupted the intent of the process, they never used it again.

It must be noted that the decision was here made, as was the case in all important political decisions at Athens, by the citizens voting directly, rather than through representatives. In fact, two such decisions were needed. Each year the citizens were asked to decide at a regular meeting of their assembly whether they wished to ostracize anyone at all. Only if this vote was affirmative were they summoned to the special meeting in the market place to decide who should be ostracized. Each citizen brought his own *ostrakon*, a fragment of some dish or cup with a name already scratched on it, to the enclosures in the market place. No one was allowed to leave the fenced area until all had deposited their sherds. A large number of these inscribed sherds have been found in the course of the excavation of the ancient Athenian market place. Three are shown on one of the slides, including a sherd which names Aristides. His ostracism in 482 B.C. became the best known of all due to a famous story about it. The story is retold by Cornelius Nepos, a Roman author, in a short biography of Aristides. It is given here so that you may read it in Latin.